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AUTHOR Harkin, Joe
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ABSTRACT

This paper gives a brief overview of Jurgen Habermas's concept of communicative action, followed by an overview of an empirical study of patterns of communication between teachers and students in English post-compulsory education. The paper sketches the ideas of Habermas about the possibility of human interaction that is free from domination. It argues that communication free from domination is both possible and desirable. The paper then draws some implications for the training of teachers. (Contains 20 references.) (NKA)

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Is communication free from domination possible in English Post-compulsory education?

JOE HARKIN, ***Oxford Brookes University***

In her inaugural address as President of the American Educational Research Association, Linda Darling-Hammond (Darling-Hammond, 1996) advocated education *as* democracy, as well as education *for* democracy. The rationale for this lies partly in response to Drucker's observation (Drucker, 1994) that the rise and fall of the blue collar worker from 1950 to the present has been the most rapid of any class in the world. By the end of the century only about ten per cent of employment in advanced capitalist countries will be blue collar work. Much employment now needs higher levels of interpersonal skills, team working, initiative taking, and more autonomous forms of behaviour. In consequence, a different type of learning and teaching is needed if people are to be prepared `to participate fully as democratic citizens or to meet the requirements of contemporary economic life` (Darling-Hammond, 1996, p.6). Unfortunately, she pointed out that in the United States, `Most schools, however, are poor places in which to learn democracy: They often illustrate authoritarian and coercive forms of social control, as well as social stratification both across schools and among tracks within schools` (*ibid*, p.6). I think that in Britain we face similar tensions between the demands of an advanced capitalist economy, democratic political processes and the present culture of education.

I think that we need to change the culture of much education, especially Post-compulsory education, if we are to resolve these tensions and promote democratic and humane values and practices, in working, family and political life. In this paper, first I will sketch the ideas of Jurgen Habermas about the possibility of human interaction that is free from domination, before presenting some findings of on-going research into the patterns of interaction between teachers and students in English Post-compulsory education. I will then draw some implications of what I have written for the training of teachers.

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Habermas distinguishes instrumental action from communicative action. He defines *instrumental action* as, `the productive activity which regulates the material interchange of the human species with its natural environment` (Habermas, cited in Outhwaite, 1994, p.16); that is, science, technology and the forms of reasoning associated with them - instrumental reason, positivism and scientism; instrumental action also refers, in more recent history, to the influence of the concept of the market and to administrative rationalization, whereby decisions about the nature of organizations, including education, may be made on grounds of "efficiency", without much regard for questions of human value.

By contrast, *communicative action* is defined by Habermas as, `the development of norms which could fulfill the dialectic of moral relationships in an interaction free of domination` (Habermas, cited in Outhwaite, 1994, p.16). It is a concept deeply rooted in a Modernist, Enlightenment tradition that, in the Anglo-Saxon world, may be linked to the democratic educational ideals of a long line of thinkers, through Jefferson, Dewey and Mead, to more recent advocates. The concept of communicative action refers not to the lived reality of actual experience, but to the possibility of such experience and to the `potential for rationality contained in the everyday practices of communication` (Habermas, 1985). It is offered by Habermas as an extra foundation for critical theory, to reinforce the philosophy of history (found in critiques based on Marxism) and the philosophy of the individual (found in critiques based on Kantianism), both of which may mask 'the intrinsic intersubjective and dialogical character of communicative action'(Bernstein, 1985, p.14).

The concept of communicative action points up that technical progress should not be conflated with the rational conduct of life. As expressed by Thomas McCarthy, it is this conflation:

> that we found to be at the roots of ...technocratic ideology...The growth of productive forces and administrative efficiency does not of itself lead to the replacement of institutions based on force by an organization of social relations based on communication

> free from domination. (McCarthy cited in Outhwaite, 1994, p. 19)

Instrumental action, whether in science, technology, commerce or the administration of life, becomes ideological in concealing social interests and pre-"scientific" decisions; moreover, so pervasive has instrumental action and its associated forms of reasoning become in our society that it eclipses the communication associated with the political will of the people and with social emancipation. In Habermas's terminology, it has "colonized the lifeworld", the world of everyday experience, and in doing so exemplifies that language is not just a means of communication which mediates our experience of the world but is `also a medium of domination and social power` (Habermas, cited in Outhwaite, 1994, p.25).

Habermas believes that a revival of the public sphere of democratic decision making requires `the organization of social communication in a way approximating to an unconstrained dialogue` (Outhwaite, 1994, p.26) and the idea of rational, informed discussion is a thread through Habermas's work. With an increase in prosperity, `the interest in the emancipation of society can no longer be articulated in economic terms`, or at least, not in those terms alone, but, `involves the mutual recognition of socialized human beings` (Outhwaite, *ibid*, p.16), achieved through communicative action.

In his inaugural lecture as Professor of Philosophy at Frankfurt, in a much quoted passage, Habermas expressed it thus:

> The human interest in autonomy and responsibility is not mere fancy...what raises us out of nature is the only thing whose nature we can know: language. Through its structure, autonomy and responsibility are posited for us. Our first sentence expresses unequivocally the intention of universal and uncontrained consensus (Habermas, 1986, p. 314)

Critical social theory is grounded for Habermas in communicative action - the possibility of human dialogue free from domination, capable of reaching consensus, even over contentious issues. It is

linked in his work to notions of reflection; not only in the sense of the rational re-construction of action to improve know how [in Ryle's sense] which rarely, in Habermas's opinion, leads to change; but also reflection as critical insight into the distortions built into participants' re-constructions of action.

For Habermas, the "ideal speech situation" may give rise to a rationally founded consensus, based on a functional view of everyday language use, that what we say is comprehensible, true, right and sincere. This view of the internal organization of language use coincides with that of philosophers of language, such as Grice (1975), who holds that the fundamental basis for language is human cooperation, a view sustained more recently by Aitchison who believes that `Language is particularly good at promoting interaction between people` (Aitchison, 1996, p.21). These views are in contrast to the popular but mistaken belief that the function of language is primarily as a conduit for information, that was countered by Reddy (1979).

When we speak there is a mutual assumption - unless shown to be unwarranted - that what we say makes linguistic sense (is comprehensible); accords in some way with objective reality (is true); accords with the normative values of our listeners (is right in the social situation); and finally, is proved by the subsequent actions of the speaker to be sincere. Habermas argues that these aspects of the *internal* organization of language vie with factors of *external* organization, such as who determines the ordering of the discussion, who can participate, in what way, i.e. factors of dominance, to shape interaction. He holds that distortions in the external organization of language lead to systematic distortions in the internal organization of language.

The result, for Habermas, is pseudo-communication in which certain topics are avoided, or are presented in untrue ways. The possiblity of a truthful and sincere dialogue, leading to consensus, is made unlikely.

Although Habermas never intended the ideal speech situation to be understood as a concrete utopia which would in Outhwaite's

expression, `turn the world into a gigantic seminar` (Outhwaite, 1994, p.45), nevertheless, Habermas distinguished `the genuinely communicative use of language to attain common goals` - which is surely the purpose of language use in education? - `and strategic or success-oriented speech, parasitic on the former, which simulates a communicative orientation in order to achieve an ulterior purpose` (*ibid*).

The influence of Habermas upon educational professionals is not uncontested. Carr believes that, `The aims and values of a critical social science, as defined by Habermas, are, then, virtually identical to the aims and values of education as defined by Richard Peters` (Carr, 1995, p.115), and he sees Habermas's work as providing a foundation for an educational science free from modern empiricist philosophy. By contrast, Elliott sees Habermas's work giving rise to `a dangerous account of action research` which denies `the possibility that teachers' self-understandings of their practices can alone constitute a source of critical self-reflection and emancipatory action (Elliott, 1991, p.116). The contested implications of Habermas's work for education parallel similar debates in other fields of enquiry, as Giddens wrote, referring to Habermas's *Theory of Communicative Action*, `The fact that Habermas's work prompts so many questions...is indicative of its extraordinary power and scope` (Giddens, 1985).

I shall now turn to the second part of my paper, which will give an account of research into the patterns of communicative interaction in English Post-compulsory education. I believe that Habermas's concept of communicative action may be used to help educationists reflect on their practice. Unlike Elliott, I believe that teachers alone do find it difficult to move beyond the reconstruction of experience to a more critical understanding of the distorting effects of situational factors, including their own habitual practices. It is not necessary, in my opinion, to be `emancipated through interaction with the critical theorems of the educational scientist` (Elliott, 1991, p.116); but it is, I think, necessary to work with someone else who can take part in a dialogue that will make the familiar and habitual strange, in order that, in time, the individual may internalise the dialogue and be able to critically review their own practice. Unlike Carr, I believe that

empirical methods, used sensitively, may help to illuminate professional practice and I am concerned that Carr's account of an educational science makes no mention of the role of the learner.

For over two years a researcher and I have investigated the patterns of communication between teachers and students in several schools and colleges. We are interested in discovering what patterns of interaction exist, what patterns are regarded by teachers and students as ideal, and the extent to which teachers are conscious of how they communicate, or whether they are habituated to patterns of communicative behaviour - even to some that may be poorly regarded by learners. So far, over seventy teachers and more than a thousand students have taken part in the research.

We have used two main research methods: a Questionnaire on Teacher Interaction (QTI), based on research carried out by Theo Wubbels and colleagues (Wubbels, 1993) at the University of Utrecht and modified by us to be valid for the English post-compulsory situation; and the use of Interpersonal Process Recall (IPR) developed by Kagan (1967, 1980) in the United States. The QTI entails a researcher administering the questionnaire to teacher and students, who provide information about their actual and ideal perceptions of interaction. IPR entails videoing a teaching session and using extracts as a basis for free discussion by all participants about the patterns of communication displayed.

This painstaking process, which has involved carefully validating the questionnaire, and many hours of discussion with teachers and students, has yielded (and continues to yield) data that may be used as a basis for teachers to reflect on how they communicate with learners - and after all, communicating is what teachers spend most of their time attempting to do. Through the use of carefully structured research with volunteer teachers and students we are attempting, in Habermassian terms, reflective re-constructions of performance of action; and also to move beyond this to attempt to gain critical insight into the distortions built into the communication between teachers and students by the external organization of interaction.

Now I stress that the teachers (and to some extent the students) are volunteers and, therefore, in keeping with the Dutch research, we expect that their performance will be better than average. Unsurprisingly, about seventy per cent of them are perceived by their students as being effective communicators - combining effective leadership and structuring of learning with warm, friendly and understanding behaviours towards learners.

The dominant view of language in government education policy (and one that is widespread throughout society) is that language is a "conduit" (Reddy, *op cit*) that unproblematically transmits information. Put crudely, you can sit forty silent learners in front of one voluble teacher who will transmit knowledge. It has long been known, however, that language is not a simple conduit - in fact language is not particulary good at transmitting information and is much more suited to human interaction or to what Malinowski called "phatic communion". The present research shows this clearly: affective behaviours, such as warmth and friendliness, were perceived by learners as being approximately three times as important as leadership and control behaviours. I will not go into detail at this time - those who are interested may refer to papers that are referenced here. What I wish to dwell on now is that, despite the general satisfaction of learners with patterns of interaction, teachers in fact control nearly all interaction in post-compulsory education. When it comes to participating in the learning process, as distinct from talking among themselves about their private lives, the silence of learners is profound. A state of equilibrium exists in most post-compulsory learning situations, in which teachers talk and learners listen - or switch off, or talk among themselves about topics unrelated to education.

In Habermassian terms, the external organization of interaction, dominated as it is by teachers, distorts the internal organization. There is very little dialogue; information may be presented unchallenged which is untrue, dated or contentious; normative issues are rarely raised so that, for example, the criticism of Business Studies made by Barnes over twenty years ago (Barnes, 1984), that it presents a roseate view of business, devoid of discussions of social

value, still holds true; the normal conventions of interaction between adults, including the need for sincerity, do not always hold. The result is pseudo-communication in which certain topics are avoided, or may be presented in distorted ways. Whilst all human communication involves distortion - there is no such thing as unconstrained dialogue - the possibility of a truthful and sincere meeting of minds in most learning situations is made unlikely and adolescents embarking, or about to embark, on employment, political citizenship and family life have almost nothing to say in many hours spent in their own education. They and their teachers are no more aware of this state of affairs than people generally are in other situations involving dominance to which they have become accustomed.

The effect of feedback from the QTI and the video recall process has sometimes been startling. For the first time, teachers with many years of experience encounter themselves as their learners see them - talking incessantly, answering their own questions, ignoring many or most of the students, using personal names only to admonish; and learners realise their own silence. The research process is a collegial one, handled as sensitively as possible and the principle of non-maleficence is adhered to by which the research outcomes for the participants should be positive or at worst neutral. So far no teacher or student has complained at the process or its outcomes, on the contrary, many have said how useful it has been to gain such vivid insight into professional behaviours that they use every day.

One explanation for the overwhelming dominance of interaction by teachers that emerges from discussion with students is that compulsory schooling teaches people to be quiet. Talking out of turn (or TOOT) is the most common misdemeanour in schools and children are taught from an early age to be silent. According to many students who reflect on their compulsory school experience, dialogue in many schools is rare and sometimes teachers do not even know the names of pupils whom they have taught for many months.

Once again, let me be clear: in reporting what so many learners say, I am not castigating teachers. Teachers and learners together are caught up in situations that are not altogether of their making.

Patterns of distorted interaction may also be set up in the home, in deep-seated gender roles, and in the expectations of employers. Education settings are to some extent created by and constrained by wider social settings, however, the normative expectations of most educational situations are that teachers talk and learners listen. The motto of the University of Sussex, where I studied, is *Be Still and Know.* And, of course, it is an excellent motto - up to a point. The point, however, is overstretched if young people are socialized into silence during the process of their own education.

One of my tasks recently has been to write the core or key skills in Communication for use in GNVQs (post-Dearing, possibly in all 16-19 education). As part of Gillian Sheppard's Spoken English campaign, I have also advised on best practice in the development and assessment of spoken English. As with the Communication styles project, I have used volunteer teachers to elicit best practice and sadly I have to report that there is very little good practice, because there is very little interaction that is free of teacher domination.

Is it any wonder that instrumental action, associated with science, technology, market forces and administrative efficiency, so prevails over communicative action, the `dialectic of moral relationships in an interaction free of domination` (Habermas, *ibid*) when so little in the public education service socializes young people to take their autonomy and responsibility seriously? The creation of opportunities for them to use language in discursive ways- the basis of rational responsibility and consensus - is so neglected.

It is time that our practice in educating teachers encouraged forms of critical reflection by them about how they communicate with learners, especially in Post-compulsory education, where more dialogic forms of interaction, free of domination, may be appropriate. It may be particulary important for teenagers, at a formative stage of development, to be given ample opportunities for dialogue. `Interactive competence is central both to ego identity and to moral consciousness, liberating the adolescent, as McCarthy puts it, "not only from the egocentrism of early childhood but from the sociocentrism of tradition-bound role behaviour as well"`. (Outhwaite,

1994, p. 51). If Gillian Sheppard really wishes to free young people from "communicating by grunt", then education must give them a chance to speak out and be heard; to respond as well as to listen. Only when education is practised *as* democracy will young people be prepared adequately for adult life, employment and citizenship. Who knows, the process may lead to the "ideal speech situation" of Habermas's concept of communicative action being actually *practised.*

Correspondence: Dr Joe Harkin, School of Education, Oxford Brookes University, Wheatley, Oxford. OX33 1HX Email: jcharkin@brookes.ac.uk

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